

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

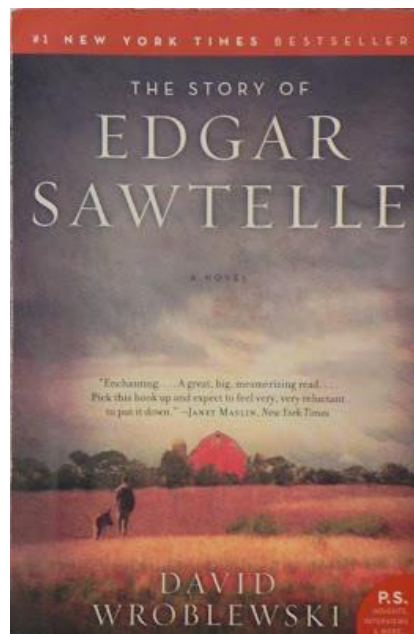
Mark L. Morris Sr. and the Birth of Prescription Pet Food

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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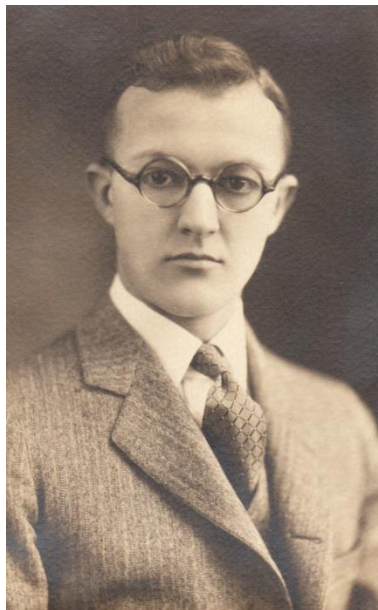
I am always fascinated when an author or producer introduces a veterinary backstory into a movie, book or other form of pop culture. Recent examples include *Water for Elephants*¹ and *War Horse*.² Though a story of fighter pilots rather than birds, *Red Tails*³ also has a connection to veterinary medicine.

So when a friend gave me a copy of the novel, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*, last summer, the reference to a famous guide dog named Buddy bred by a kennel in New Jersey caught my attention. While investigating events surrounding the suspicious death of his father, young Edgar discovers letters written in 1934 by his late grandfather to a man in Morristown named Brooks, one of the original breeders of guide dogs for the blind. Author David Wroblewski doesn't tell us about the far-reaching contribution of Buddy, his role in the development of the pet food industry in general, so here is the "rest of the story."



Cover of David Wroblewski's novel,
"The Story of Edgar Sawtelle".
(Photo by Dr. Smith)

Mark Morris was an advanced-standing transfer student who arrived at Cornell University in the fall of 1925 and received his veterinary degree the following spring. Two years later, he established the Raritan Hospital for Animals in Edison, New Jersey, considered at the time to be the second exclusive small animal practice in the country.⁴ Ahead of his time in many of his veterinary concepts and practices, Morris became convinced that proper nutrition was essential to improve the health and well-being of pets.



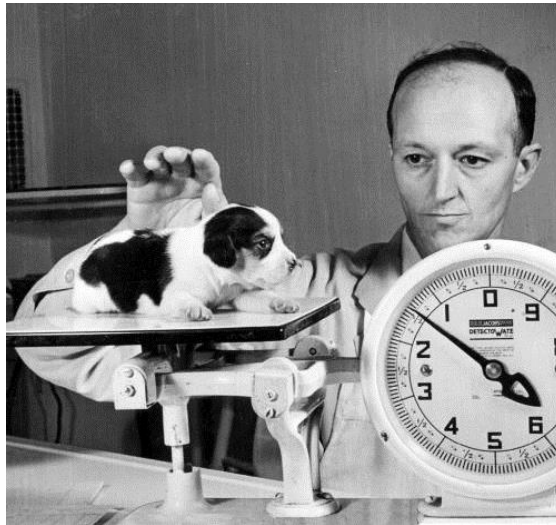
Dr. Mark L. Morris Sr., Cornell Graduate 1926
(Photograph © Cornell University)

During the 1930s, a blind man named Morris Frank was touring the country by train with the country's first guide dog for the blind, a Swiss-born German Shepherd named Buddy. Morris and Buddy became national advocates for these working dogs, demonstrating the positive impact they could have on the life of a blind person, allowing them to navigate in their homes and communities independently, safely and with dignity.

When Buddy's life was threatened by kidney disease, Dr. Morris was consulted and he formulated a diet low in protein and salt that slowed the progression of the renal failure. This diet allowed Buddy and Mr. Frank to continue their travels about the country spreading the good news of dogs as helping companions for the blind.

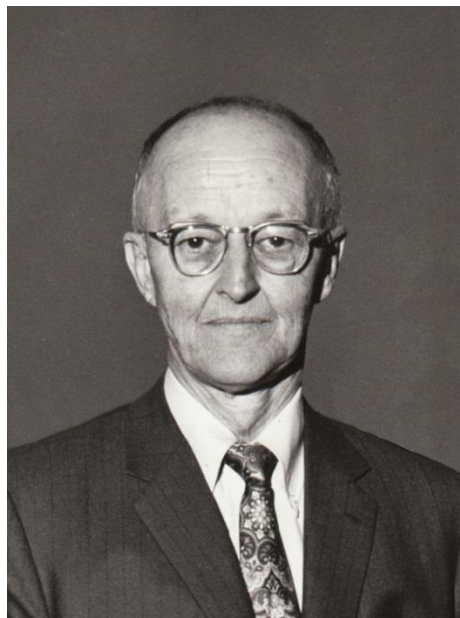
Initially, Buddy's special food was mailed as needed to Mr. Frank in glass jars, but the jars often broke in transit. Morris and his wife, Louise, then developed a canning procedure for processing of the specialized diet. Meanwhile, everywhere Mr. Frank and Buddy went throughout the country, they were telling people of the miraculous and life-saving food developed by the Morris' back in New Jersey.⁵ The Morris' fame spread and the prescription pet food industry was born.

The 'kidney diet' was named Canine k/d®, and was later licensed to Hill's Packing Company (now Hill's Pet Nutrition) to produce what became a growing line of pet prescription formula diets.⁶



Mark L. Morris Sr. weighing a puppy.
(© [The Morris Animal Foundation](#))

With the royalties from the sale of these diets, Mark Morris established a foundation in 1948 dedicated to animal health and well-being. Originally called the Buddy Foundation, the [Morris Animal Foundation](#) is now the largest organization in the world to invest in research that promises to advance veterinary medicine and improve the quality of life for companion animals, horses and wildlife. The Foundation also supports scholarships for veterinary students.



Dr. Mark L. Morris Sr. in late life.
(© [The Morris Animal Foundation](#))

In 1993 Dr. Morris died at the age of 92. His legacy continued through his veterinarian son, Dr. Mark L. Morris Jr., who died in 2007.⁷

¹ *Water for Elephants*, a book by Sara Groen (2007) and movie (2011), describes the life of a fictional circus veterinarian during the 1930s.

² *War Horse*, a book by Michael Morpurgo, Broadway play (2000), and movie (2011), includes the veterinary care of a wounded and battle-weary horse during World War I.

³ Red Tails is the story of the squadrons of W.W.II African-American fighter pilots. The development of the Red Tail program was facilitated by university president and veterinarian, F.D. Patterson at the Tuskegee Institute.

⁴ Morris and a small group of veterinarians founded the American Animal Hospital Association in 1933, and he became the first president. Morris also served as president of the American Veterinary Medical Association (1961-62).

⁵ Personal Conversation between Dr. Mark L. Morris, Jr. and the author, Cornell University, *circa* 1995.

⁶ The Story of Hill's Pet Nutrition, www.hillspet.com/our-company/story-of-hills-pet-nutrition.html

⁷ Mark L. Morris Jr. earned his DVM at Cornell in 1958, and his MS and PhD from the University of Wisconsin in 1963.

KEYWORDS:

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The Story of Edgar Sawtelle
American Animal Hospital Association
Raritan Animal Hospital
Hill's Pet Nutrition

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National

Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.